

*Michael Dempsey*

## *A Job Becomes a Passionate Career*

*By Glenda Beal*

When he took a job in 1985 as a correctional officer at the Missouri State Penitentiary, 21-year-old Michael Dempsey did not expect it to lead to a satisfying career. At the time, it was just a job, a necessary part of his resolve to get his life together after troubled teen years and no high school diploma — a job suggested by his father, a Missouri prison lieutenant who had retired from law enforcement.

Throughout his career, Dempsey's passion to make a difference in the lives of youths has been rooted in that beginning. "It's an important part of my life. It changed me. And that's part of the reason I work with juveniles now. You can take a troubled portion of your life and, in a positive way, turn things around." What Dempsey does is considerable. He earned a bachelor's degree in public administration and criminal justice during his 19 years working with adults and juveniles in the Missouri correctional system. He moved on to become superintendent of the Kansas Juvenile Correctional Complex in 2004. Two years later, he brought his expertise, his passion for change and his own personal understanding of troubled youths to Pendleton Juvenile Correctional Facility in Indiana where he serves as superintendent.

Indiana Commissioner J. David Donahue praises Dempsey as "someone who thinks of new and innovative ways to reach promising correctional practices." As superintendent, he has "raised the expectations for safety and security for the Indiana Department of Correction," Donahue said.

Acknowledging the often difficult and frustrating work faced by his dedicated and committed staff, Dempsey praises them for "truly making a difference in the lives of the youths they serve." He's proud that they work as a team to improve the facility's operations and build innova-

tive programs. One of his most successful operational improvements is the use of Crisis Awareness Response Effort (CARE) teams to diffuse potential incidents involving use of force. Evaluating the resources required following a use-of-force incident, Dempsey saw the logic in using resources to prevent such incidents. "Our CARE teams use all available resources at the onset of a problem. When an offender begins to escalate a situation or is noncompliant, everybody stops what they are doing. ... The mission is to simply de-escalate the offender without the use of force or need of segregation." The program is supportive of both staff and offenders, often establishing neutrality by giving agitated offenders the opportunity to talk with someone who is not involved in the immediate situation. "Now, instead of being cuffed and taken away, offenders know that someone is actually coming to de-escalate the situation," Dempsey said. It also gives the involved officer or staff person an opportunity to step away from the situation and cool down.

Another operational change that increases safety and security in the facility is Dempsey's incident-monitoring system, a database tracking system that has fostered communication and enabled executive staff to monitor problem areas and see where resources are needed in the facility. All incidents in a 24-hour period are entered into a database and plotted on a map of the facility so that problems can be tracked and addressed. When this technology was first used, Dempsey learned that 50 percent of the incidents at Pendleton were caused by 20 offenders in a population of more than 300. The program is also used to identify staff who are struggling to meet expectations and need additional training or counseling to improve their offender-interaction skills.

Dempsey has also added effective offender programs at Pendleton. He

## *Best in the Business*



is proud of his Future Soldiers Program that identifies offenders meeting enlistment criteria and, as part of their reentry program, prepares them for military recruitment. Another program, Gang Realities in our World (GROW), brings offenders with gang ties together with rival gang members to participate in programs — and even to play chess. Dempsey is also developing a restorative justice component for vocational and educational classes that will require offenders "to recognize how their crimes have hurt others and find ways to make amends for that hurt."

Dempsey is very supportive of accreditation, working both with the American Correctional Association and the Council of Juvenile Corrections Administrators. He has been involved in ACA accreditation audits for many years and now serves as an auditor at other facilities.

In addition to the commitment to his work and making a difference, Dempsey is devoted to and extremely proud of his two young sons — Ryan, 6, and Garrett, 5.

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*Glenda Beal is a contributing editor for Corrections Today.*